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SUBJECT: LEADER OF NUEVO LEON TEACHERS UNION VIGOROUSLY
DEFENDS HIS ORGANIZATION

REF: MEXICO 1049

¶11. Summary: Mission Mexico personnel recently met with Juan Antonio Rodriguez Gonzalez, the head of Section 21 of the teachers, union in the northern state of Nuevo Leon. Section 21 is a part of the National Teachers Union (SNTE) whose members are federal civil service employees. Over the course of the meeting Rodriguez strongly affirmed his allegiance to both the SNTE and to the president of the national union, Elba Ester Gordillo Morales, a controversial figure often blamed for many of the ills of Mexico's public schools system. At no time did Rodriguez attempt to deny the questionable state of Mexico's public school system nor did he seek to gainsay the political clout of this powerful union. He did, however, attempt to put the ills of the union in historical and political context. Having just returned from an SNTE national conference, Rodriguez discussed some elements of a plan of action agreed to at that event to begin to address the problems of Mexican public schools. In discussing ways to improve the effectiveness of Mexico's schools, he acknowledged an urgent need for better teacher training, particularly with regard to teaching English. Rodriguez then made a pitch for USG assistance in this area. Better English language teaching skills he stated would help teachers prepare students for success in Mexico's always tight job market. End Summary.

A UNION LEADER STANDS HIS GROUND

¶12. On April 8, AmConsul Monterrey's Pol/Econ Officer and Mission Mexico's Labor Counselor met with Juan Antonio Rodriguez Gonzalez, the head of Section (Local) 21 of the National Teachers Union (SNTE) in the northern state of Nuevo Leon. Rodriguez is currently about half way through a four-year term as the head of the Nuevo Leon teachers, union. At the time of the meeting Rodriguez had only just returned from a conference of the SNTE's 24th National Council where, according to press reports, the labor organization discussed such issues as way to improve the quality of education in Mexican public schools, a restructuring of the SNTE's central executive committee, the union's relationship with the GOM's Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) and negotiations for a five percent increase in teacher salaries. All SNTE teachers are federal civil service employees.

¶13. Within a very few moments of the start of the meeting Rodriguez declared that in addition to being a labor union the SNTE was also an organization with a firmly held left wing political philosophy. Speaking quietly but firmly Rodriguez left no doubt that he was very comfortable with that philosophy. As the meeting went on the Nuevo Leon SNTE leader asserted that the teachers of SNTE are often criticized and attacked politically because of their leftist principles. Because of their ideals, Rodriguez declared, the teachers and their union are not afraid to stand up for what they believe and challenge right wing politicians and other vested interests in Mexico.

¶14. Later in the meeting, when again touching on the theme of standing up for firmly held principles Rodriguez aggressively, but respectfully, raised the subject of US immigration policy. Like many Mexicans across the political spectrum Rodriguez felt that the US should acknowledge the contributions to the American economy being made by Mexican migrants. He sharply criticized the building of a wall along the US/Mexico border and asserted that no matter how high or technologically advanced the wall was Mexicans would always find a way to enter the US. Consequently, he opined, the US should adapt a more open immigration policy and take immediate steps to provide legal residence to the Mexicans already living in the United States.

¶15. His openly displayed leftist principles notwithstanding, Rodriguez showed he was prepared to listen to new information and factor this into his thinking. After explaining the USG's position on enhanced entry/exit border controls Mission Labor Counselor cautioned Rodriguez to consider the most likely outcome of any reform of US immigration law. Labor Counselor pointed out to Rodriguez that any future

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reform would most likely provide benefits to all foreign nationals and not just Mexicans. Leaving aside the issue of foreign nationals already in the US, Rodriguez was asked to consider what would happen when the geographic advantage enjoyed by Mexicans migrants was neutralized by reforms that placed all migrants on an equal footing. Rodriguez acknowledged that he had never considered what would happen to Mexicans hoping to migrate to the US when they had to compete for immigration benefits with people from China, India, the Philippines and other labor exporting countries. He then indicated that he would have to give the entire matter careful additional thought.

THEY MADE US WHAT WE ARE

¶16. When asked why he thought the SNTE was viewed negatively by so many Mexicans Rodriguez stated that it was unfair to judge the union without understanding the historical context that created it. Because of its size (SNTE is the largest single union in Latin America) and the fact that its members are civil servants, teachers have always been viewed as easily mobilized foot soldiers by previous Mexican governments at both the federal and state levels. In fact, Rodriguez asserted, the teachers union has received financial incentives to keep growing so that Mexican politicians could always have a large and disciplined rent-a-crowd on call. Over the years the SNTE and its members have been drafted as demonstrators and foot soldiers into countless political battles.

¶17. Given this context, Rodriguez said, it is no wonder that the SNTE became a highly political organization that soon realized that its size enabled it to pursue its own agenda. This realization, he continued, has occasionally prompted some within the union to focus more on political agendas and principles rather than on improving the quality of education in Mexico's public school system. The SNTE is now both a labor union and an influential political organization. In

recent years, Rodriguez continued, the SNTE has turned into a major actor on the Mexican political scene largely because of the influence of the organization's national leader, Elba Ester Gordillo Morales. Often referred to simply as "the Teacher," Gordillo is commonly cited as an excellent example of everything that is wrong with Mexican labor leaders. For example, she recently arranged to have herself declared the de facto SNTE president for life; the union is widely believed to be corrupt and she is regularly criticized for her ostentatiously lavish lifestyle. Nevertheless she is a power in Mexican politics and can legitimately claim that she played a significant role in the election of Mexico's current President, Felipe Calderon, when she had SNTE quietly through him its support. For his part, Rodriguez stated that he was in complete agreement with Gordillo's handling of SNTE affairs and that he was firmly in her camp with regard to both her union and political activities.

IDEAS FOR IMPROVING MEXICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

¶ 8. As mentioned above, at the time of the meeting Rodriguez had only just returned from an assembly of the SNTE's 24th National Council. During that meeting he said Elba Ester Gordillo had called on the SNTE members present at the event to come together and agree on ideas to address some of the more urgent problems in Mexico's public school system. According to Rodriguez the attendees collectively came up with numerous suggestions for improving the quality of education in Mexico's public schools. One of the first things the National Council meeting agreed Mexico needed to do was adopt a new underlying teaching philosophy and more modern teaching methods. Mexico's teaching methods, he stated, were 50 years out of date. The teaching methods now in use were cutting edge at the time they were adopted but they were no longer adequate to the needs of the country; particularly with respect to preparing students to compete for jobs in Mexico's increasingly globalized economy. Rodriguez himself also supported additional training for teachers, which could help improve their teaching methods.

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¶ 9. Moving on from the number one priority of adopting new teaching methods Rodriguez then shared some of the other elements agreed to at the National Council meeting. Some of the elements agreed to were clearly intended to address education issues. These elements included things like: increasing the operating hours of public schools to include evenings and Saturdays; firmly resisting demands to teach a religious curriculum in public schools; and reorganizing the SNTE itself so that it can respond with flexibility to the challenges of providing Mexican public school students with a modern education. Other elements agreed to were more concerned with issues related to labor rights (as perceived by the SNTE). Some of these elements were: a promise of SNTE unity to resist the efforts of some conservatives and politicians who wish to weaken the union as an organization; within the SNTE itself, the organization should avoid seeking to assign blame for past mistakes and focus on making the union focus more on education (and by implication less on politics); and finally remain vigilant in defending the rights of the SNTE as an autonomous union.

A REQUEST FOR USG ASSISTANCE

¶ 10. In addition to the elements listed above Rodriguez also mentioned another point that he personally believed needed to be addressed in order to improve the quality of education in Mexico's public schools. In his view, in order to help Mexican students better prepare to enter an increasingly competitive job market public schools had to help them learn English. Rodriguez openly admitted that the English language

teaching abilities of the teachers who form the SNTE membership was extremely limited. He asked if there were any way that the USG could help him and the SNTE to improve the skills of teachers in this area. Mission Mexico personnel offered to attempt to look into this possibility.

COMMENT

¶11. Up until now Mission Mexico's Labor Counselor has been rebuffed in his attempts to meet with SNTE members, and AmConsul Monterrey has had relatively little direct contact with the teachers union. This meeting with SNTE Section 21 leader Juan Antonio Rodriguez Gonzalez appears to have been a productive initial contact. Following the meeting with Rodriguez Mission personnel learned that he writes a regular opinion column on the SNTE and on education issues for one of Nuevo Leon's daily newspapers (El Porvenir). Rodriguez openly discussed what he saw as the strengths and weakness of the SNTE both as a labor union and as an organization with a vital role with Mexico's system of public education. The leader of the Nuevo Leon teachers union was very upfront in presenting the political orientation of the labor organization with which he so clearly identified. However, as indicated when he engaged in a discussion of US immigration policy, he did not let that orientation prevent him from listening to and processing new information.

¶12. This message was cleared by AmConsul Monterrey.

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